

We Must Shift From Teacher Quality to Teaching Quality

Education Week

By Dr. Joseph (Joey) Wise

Remarkable transformations in pre-K-12 education have occurred over the past 30 years; some have actually enriched schools and school systems by implementing systemic efficiencies. Others have served to heighten awareness of all that effective teaching actually entails. But many have been devastating. They have weakened the work being done in pre-K-12 classrooms, and set in motion certain practices and protocols that frankly undermine daily instruction.

Over a period of decades—decades of hard work and even greater posturing that ultimately resulted in the adoption of the federal No Child Left Behind Act—we have blurred an essential component of our work: accountability.

Accountability, at its essence, is not a goal; it is the acceptance of responsibility for all that we do in our classrooms, day in and day out. Accountability, when embraced for what it is, turns out to be not some sort of punitive “gotcha”; instead, it is what drives commitment to continuous examination, reflection, and improvement.

Despite the upside of accountability, we have failed to manage its unforeseen downside: a tendency to look back at regimented instruction with a sanitized fondness. It seems we have, in our profession, lost the will to acknowledge and leverage the multiple ways in which children learn—or to recognize the multiple ways children fail to learn when ineffective teaching is all that a classroom provides. We have, perhaps, become a nation of educators focusing wholly on the what of teaching, without effectively confronting the far messier (but pivotal) how of teaching.

No doubt content—the what in teaching—is essential. But we don’t teach in a vacuum. And it is evident that teaching centered solely on the content of what is being taught—while ignoring the how of delivering it effectively—is deadly. The practice enables us to reach only a fraction of students, and overlooks a fundamental reality: Our students continue to learn in diverse and different ways, often despite our well-intentioned efforts. The bottom line for us now is that accountability solely for the what of whatever is being taught is not enough, and ultimately impairs the very academic mastery we intend with students. If we are to make sustainable change in the lives of our students, we as educators have a baseline duty to establish accountability for how we are teaching.

This singular focus on the what has also led to interminable state and local debates about what academic standards are adopted, what assessments are valid and used, what curriculum is implemented, what data are analyzed, what policies are embraced—and, ultimately, what information is presented to our children. This one-dimensional approach to teaching and learning measures only one element of the equation, by focusing on content—a potent political and policy driver—in isolation from other essential elements. But deciding on and measuring only what is taught manifests a constant churn, and continues to conceal a fundamental flaw in the work we do.

We now largely discount or wholly ignore the how of teaching and how of learning. We measure and remeasure each school’s “adequate yearly progress.” We engage in benchmark testing, high-stakes testing, measurement of student population and population trends, measurement of students-per-class and students-per-employee; measurement of the number of impoverished students and numbers of racially identifiable students per school or district; measurement of special education services offered—the what measurement lists go on and on. Again, our work on and measurement in the what in teaching is not without merit; it simply is not enough. It never has been.

The Obama administration has made great strides toward correcting our federal funding deficiencies in pre-K-12 education. Bold leadership at the federal level, however, must be matched at the district and school levels with a committed focus on teaching as a practice.

Thoughtful leadership on the how of teaching is not entirely absent from our pre-K-12 teaching profession. But much of the leadership influencing how teachers teach has been narrowly focused, disjointed, and flat-out misguided. For us to effectively support our teachers and lead schools effectively, we must provide constructive, holistic, and behaviorally measurable guidance on how to engage students in the content being taught. By supporting and guiding teachers in the delivery of instruction, we ensure that classroom teaching will be not simply correlative to learning; it will cause learning.

Historically, intense focus on the what of teaching has led us away from a healthy balance of all that drives true academic achievement. How we teach, how we challenge, how we redirect, and how we engage students is of no less importance than the what we profess to teach. Ironically, over the years, we actually have learned much and documented much about best practices in teaching. Substantial and expert research reveals that we already have explored and analyzed much about the how of teaching; we simply haven’t acknowledged its pivotal effect on academic achievement in the way we support and coach teachers.

It is our duty as educators to ensure that teaching is powerful. And powerful teaching is as much about effective communication as it is about the content communicated. We as a profession have a compelling need to balance the what with the how in teaching, and to shift the argument away from teacher quality to teaching quality—for every child, in every classroom, every day.

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